Reason as Characteristic of the Age.

When Galileo made the statement that he had discovered spots on the sun by means of his newly invented telescope, men said that it could not be so, it was not in the Bible. They even thought it wrong to search into nature for the truths hidden there, or to believe more than was directly revealed by the word of God.

Contrast this with man's attitude today. The insatiable desire for knowledge leads him into every field of mental activity, from the vast realms of space to the unfathomable mysteries of life. We are living in an age of reason and research — reason bearing on the practical. Science in all its departments has had its birth in the last two centuries. Mathematics tho known to the Greeks has only reached any practical development since the days of Newton. And even philosophy, the consummation of Greek thought, has advanced more during the last two hundred years than it did during the best days of Greece.

The practical application of modern reason is well illustrated by a comparison of Greek life with our own. Imagine a city without factories, where work was considered degrading, a city without railway telegraph, or mail systems, with no means of communication with the world, and whose citizens were considered enemies outside of their own walls. Such a city was Athens, or Sparta, or Thebes.

The Greeks reached a high degree of civilization but it never tended to better the life of the common people. More than half the population were in slavery and the condition of woman was not much higher. The sun and the winds were gods to

Aristotle as much as to the lowest savage.

But why confine ourselves to the Greeks? Even at the time of the Crusades, alchemy and astrology held sway, the belief in witchcraft was prevalent, and direct intervention from the spiritual world was constantly looked for. It is said that the methods of war have changed more since the time of Napoleon than they did between his time and that of Alexander the great. And no doubt this is equally as true of the character of life in general. The reason of man has brought to light the workings of nature, principle after principle, first as theory and then as proven law, and it has compelled the natural forces to do us service. Probably the ~~practical~~ application of natural laws has done more for the uplifting of humanity than all other causes combined with the exception of Christianity. It has placed civilized man farther above the barbarian and less liable to his destructive conquests. It has raised the lower classes from the mere struggle for existence to a position where they can realize the blessings of freedom and education.

Unfortunately the results of this development of reason are not unqualifiedly good. The remarkable success which man has had in the application of his theories has tended to make him overconfident in his rational powers, with a corresponding decrease of faith. He is unwilling to believe more than he can prove. This supreme reliance on reason began as early as the Reformation. Luther withdrew from the

established church partly because of abuses in it, but primarily because certain beliefs of that church did not seem reasonable to him. During the French Revolution, the French people went so far as to deny the existence of God and to worship reason as a deity. Atheism at the present day is only another development of this same idea. As man beholds one mystery after another dissolve before the magic power of reason — phenomena formerly attributed to supernatural power gradually explained by simple laws, he reasons that had man sufficient intelligence, he could explain everything in a similiar manner.

Still I do not believe that these evils will not last.* As man becomes better acquainted with the workings of nature, he will more fully appreciate the intellect and the power which planned and fashioned this wonderful universe and all that exists within it. The highest possible development of reason can but trace our existence back to a divine origin, and must in the end give us a higher and nobler conception of God.

* It is profoundly true, as Bacon said, that "a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth man's minds about to religion."

Joseph P. McCormack's
Valedictory Speech
Middlebury 1907